

BELLAMY REVERSED.

A LONG LOOK AHEAD.

CAESAR'S COLUMN. A Story of the Twentieth Century. By Edmund Boisgibert, M. D., 12mo, pp. 367. Chicago: F. J. Schulte & Co.

This story may be said to occupy the nadir of that pole of speculation upon which Mr. Bellamy's "Looking Backward" represents the zenith. As the latter expresses the optimism of the period, so this expresses its pessimism. There always will be two radically antagonistic schools of thought in respect of human affairs. The one looks without disquiet upon the most ominous phenomena, and is satisfied that reforms and mitigations and solutions will be found and applied in good time to all evils, abuses and causes of discontent. The other argues that the tendency of the gravest existing evils is to spread and increase; that they have already been allowed too much headway to be restrained; that the vices and weaknesses which have produced, must perpetuate and extend them; and that as mischief will thus grow in geometrical progression, the only possible end can be a catastrophe. It is to the exposition of this gloomy view that Dr. Boisgibert has addressed his literary gift, and it must in fairness be said for him that what he has written is put forward as an earnest and sincere expression of a clearly-defined apprehension. When an author, indeed, writes a preface to a work of fiction, the more fact demonstrates that he has a purpose beyond the simple one of amassing his readers; and the purpose underlying Dr. Boisgibert's book is very serious indeed.

In the year 1885, according to this ingenious forecast, civilization will be so thoroughly rotten that its destruction can no longer be delayed. The great Empire of the West fell under the attacks of external barbarism; but the modern civilization is to succumb to the forces itself has generated, upon the exhaustion of which it has established a colossal plutocracy, and which it has gradually alienated and educated to desperate enmity. In the century intervening between the present time and that of the story material civilization has made enormous advances. The navigation of the air has been accomplished, and this triumph has really given to the oligarchy ruling the United States its stability; for it has put in their unscrupulous hands a force against which even numbers and despair struggle in vain. For while it is always possible for the Proletariat to rise, build barricades, and fight behind them, what can be effected against air-ships which, floating out of cannon range, drop dynamite and poison bombs perpendicularly into the thickest masses of the insurgenst, and so slaughter them at wholesale with absolute impunity? These dreadful air-ships are called "Demons" by the people. The oligarchs have been careful to retain the absolute control of them, and to isolate them and their crews in a fortified armory. As to the oligarchs itself, the author believes it is the natural outcome of the present situation; a century has developed all the agencies which cause him doubt and anxiety to-day. The concentration of wealth in a few hands has gone on with ever accelerating rapidity. In the great cities the advance of invention and the abnormal growth of population through immigration have by degrees sunk the working classes into pauperage. Wages have been depressed to starvation point, and for the toiling millions there is no longer any hope.

The professional and so-called middle classes have in the meantime lost all political power and are but the creatures of satrapies, who, through enormous wealth, have acquired despotic control of the country. Republican forms are still adhered to for the sake of appearances, but the press is wholly vocal and exists only to register the decrees of the oligarchy and to express their views of events and policies. Politicians and officials are all corrupt—nobody cares for anything but money and luxury. Patriotism, honor, religion, conscience, duty, are all dead phrases. Society believes nothing as to the future and concerns itself about nothing beyond the hour. Such is the gloomy forecast of this book.

Below all the glow and glitter and external beauty of this unparalleled opulence and luxury is working a tremendous volcanic force. The Proletariat has in its agony evolved a grim and great machinery, not of revenge and reform, but of revenge. A secret organization—a new International, fitted to the enlarged scope of things—has been established. Its ramifications cover all Europe and the two Americas; it has 100,000,000 members, and it is called the Brotherhood of Destruction. At its head are three men of remarkable capacity. By the craftiest means they have succeeded in arming this immense multitude with the latest magazine rifles and ample supplies of fixed ammunition. Their plans are complete, but for one serious point. They have not yet been able to buy over the Demons, with whose aid, or against whose opposition, they can hope to effect nothing.

But at such a time the stars in their courses fight against the doomed civilization, and so it is quite natural that the oligarchs should lose the support of the Demons at the critical moment. They know what the Brotherhood has been doing. They have their own military preparations made. They mean to let the masses rise and barricade themselves, and when they are shut up as in a rat-trap the troops are to hem them in while the Demons from above drop poison and dynamite bombs into their ranks until they are utterly destroyed. Unfortunately for the carrying out of this programme, the Demons—the Machines of the Air, as Dr. Boisgibert very picturesquely calls them—turn traitor to the oligarchs; and when they at last sail forth from their armory and take position above the city, it is into the ranks of the militia, and not into those of the insurgents that their deadly missiles plunge. The result, of course, is foregone conclusion, for in the night the Brotherhood has caused a new line of barricades to be erected behind the troops, cutting off their escape. There is then no evasion for them, and they die to the last man, while the revolution, after the first few hours of organized and ferocious vengeance, escapes the control of the leaders, as all revolutions have ever done, and resolves itself into a blind, indiscriminate carnage and anarchy. We have not told the story, but merely indicated in outline its character and motive.

The story contains a number of dramatic tableaux, such as the secret meeting of the Brotherhood of Destruction, the Council of the Oligarchs in the palace of Prince Cabano, the rescue of Estelle Washington, the scene of the outbreak, the erection of Caesar's Column (a particularly ghastly conception), and the flight of Max, his friend Gabriel, and their wives, in the Demon. Dr. Boisgibert, in the description of the workingmen's meeting, cleverly introduces a variety of arguments indicating the direction and progress of popular thought. In other places he exhibits his own theories as to the means of preventing such a general overthrow of civilization as the story supposes; but here he is not at his best, for his economic and financial ideas are crude and defective. He appears to be a believer in the power of Government to maintain a paper currency at par without any specie basis. He can think of no saner remedy for monopoly in land and concentration of capital than statutory restraints upon the area of land and the amount of money held by the individual. In short, his ideas run distinctly toward socialism and paternalism, and at the close he gives a sketch of a colony in Africa, which, saved by its remoteness and primitive condition from the general ruin, establishes itself firmly as the nucleus of a new and better civilization, upon one of those semi-paternalistic plans the unapplicability of which to great populations is apparent on the face of it.

"Caesar's Column" will appeal to that considerable class of thinkers which, from temperance, tends always toward pessimistic views, and is therefore prepared to concur in the broadest and darkest inferences and prospective dangers. The book, moreover, may be read with interest as an emphatic offset to Mr. Bellamy's agreeable optimism; nor will it do any harm if it stimulates thought and discussion concerning the grave subjects of which it treats, and which, whatever views the reader may take, are deserving of the most earnest study and reflection.

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